



PETER BLOK AND RICKY KOOLE IN PAUL VERHOEVEN'S *TRICKED*, FILMED FROM A "CROWD-SOURCED" SCRIPT.

On its journey to its fourth edition, the Aruba International Film Festival (AIFF) traversed a road even rockier than the one leading to the island's fabled natural pool. Faced with the loss of government funding, co-founder and executive editor Jonathan Vieira invested a significant amount of his own money to keep the fest afloat. Although there were no huge marquee names at the 2013 event, the programming seemed more astute than last year's. AIFF's strategy was to showcase more films from the Caribbean and Latin America, a smart move since by far its most popular offerings in 2012 were of local origin (most especially the doc *Children of the Wind*, about champion windsurfers from Bonaire, which returned for a special encore screening).

The fest got off to an auspicious start with three sold-out opening-night screenings at the Caribbean Cinemas at Palm Beach Plaza—an encouraging sign after the sparse attendance for some of last year's films. (It's not easy to get people into theatres when beaches and other tropical pleasures beckon.) Two of those screenings were of *Abo So (Only You)*, the first feature-length film produced in Aruba, a musical about two young people who fall in love but are split apart by family prejudice. Director Francisco Pardo made the film in ten days for \$20,000—and the low budget shows—but the two leads are appealing and charismatic (and can sing!), and the soundtrack features lots of catchy songs written by beloved Caribbean veteran Padú del Caribe. With its home-court advantage, *Abo So* won the fest's "Caribbean Spotlight Series" Audience Award.

Though the emphasis was on the Southern Hemisphere, AIFF also maintained its connection with Aruba's mother country, the Netherlands. And so the biggest name attending this year was Holland's best-known director, Paul Verhoeven, the man behind *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, *Starship Troopers* and the infamous *Showgirls*.

The fest opened with *Tricked*, Verhoeven's first feature since his return to Holland with 2006's outrageous World War II thriller

CARIBBEAN FLAVOR

Aruba Film Festival Spotlights Regional Auteurs

by Kevin Lally

Black Book. What sets *Tricked* apart is the way it was made: Screenwriter Kim van Kooten wrote the first five minutes of a domestic tale involving a wealthy businessman, his wife, son and daughter and the other women in his life. The filmmakers then invited the Dutch public to submit script pages for the next five minutes of the story, part of a continuing process that eventually resulted in a 53-minute film. Thousands of scripts were ultimately submitted, and Verhoeven and his team cherry-picked the best ideas, while still mindful that it all had to come together as a coherent whole.

Lo and behold, this short comedy is better-constructed than many a current example of the genre. In an interview, the effusive, 74-year-old Verhoeven told me he was amazed that it all turned out so well, never revealing the unique, "crowd-sourced" way the film was devised. Verhoeven chronicles that process in a behind-the-scenes documentary preceding the mini-feature, which pads the program out to feature length but limits it even more to a specialized audience.

The cheerfully blunt director also participated in a Wednesday afternoon public career Q&A with *Hollywood Reporter* executive editor Stephen Galloway. He defended the notorious *Showgirls* as "a very elegantly shot movie...with camera moves inspired by Renoir and Fellini." But, of course, its reputation as one of the all-time "so bad it's good" camp classics "made life more difficult," he admitted. The solution to a fiasco like that? "Make another movie."

Other tantalizing tidbits: Verhoeven was offered *The Silence of the Lambs* but thought the material was "too dark" to be a box-office success. And Michael Douglas and producing studio Carolco didn't want Sharon Stone for *Basic Instinct*; Douglas in particular wanted a much bigger star like Michelle Pfeiffer to help share the burden of the expected controversy around the film's edgy sex scenes.

AIFF's "Caribbean Spotlight Series" and "DOXNFOCUS" showcase yielded some true discoveries. Chief among them for this writer was *Edificio Royal*, a darkly comic tale of a once-grand but now rundown and roach-infested apartment building in Barranquilla, Colombia, and the eccentric

people who reside there. They include a demanding diva, an embalmer and his tarot card-obsessed wife, an elderly couple dealing with Alzheimer's, and a very harried superintendent. Iván Wild's film, dominated by elegantly choreographed long takes and a fractured time scheme, all takes place inside the building and casts an unsettling spell reminiscent of Roman Polanski's *The Tenant*. Wild is certainly a new talent to watch.

The "Caribbean Spotlight Series" Jury Award winner, Venezuela's *Breach of Silence*, also boasted a confident and sensuous visual style. Luis and Andrés Rodríguez's drama is the harrowing story of a deaf girl who is being abused by her stepfather and is unable to communicate her plight to the rest of her family. Then her sister is also targeted.

Oppressive lives were a frequent subject of the AIFF entries from the Southern Hemisphere. Billy Raftery's *Angels in Exile* is a powerful and intimate look at the lives of Ariel and Zuleikia, teenage victims of abuse living on the streets in a very dangerous part of Durban, South Africa. Raftery gained the trust of his young subjects, and what his cameras capture is often shocking beyond belief. But hold tight: This documentary, against all expectations, culminates in a happy ending.

Songs of Redemption, from Spanish directors Amanda Sans and Miguel Galofré, looks at a music program that has redeemed the lives of inmates at the General Penitentiary in Kingston, Jamaica. Another prison portrait was *Captive Beauty*, which follows a beauty pageant inside a facility for women in Medellín, Colombia, and the diverse stories of several inmates whose hopes are either fulfilled or dashed during the course of the film. American Jared Goodman directed, and doc veteran Joe Berlinger is one of the producers.

Finally, of special interest to our readers in exhibition is *Finding Hollywood*, Leah Warshawski and Chris Towsy's doc about a filmmaking program that has helped the war-torn country of Rwanda to heal, and the man named Ayuub who brings those homegrown films to remote villages using an inflatable screen. Although many of the films deal with very troubling issues, the screening audiences are rapt. Yes, the power of cinema is alive and well even in Rwanda. ✱